

# Mental health issues and challenges among nepalese migrant workers

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## Introduction

Nepalese are working in various countries across the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and other regions as migrant workers. They are the major source of economic remittances and support the country's economy but the mental health issues they bear often goes unnoticed. The work and living conditions faced by many Nepalese migrant workers, along with prolonged separation from family and social support systems, expose them to mental health challenges that require urgent attention.

## Prevalence of mental health issues

Mental health issues among Nepalese migrant workers are on increasing trends, with studies showing high rates of depression, anxiety, and severe form of mental illness.<sup>1</sup> A cross-sectional study done in 2019 showed that Nepalese workers in the Gulf countries and Malaysia exhibited high levels of psychological distress.<sup>2</sup> There are multiple contributing factors including social isolation, financial burdens, exploitative working conditions, and uncertain job security in the generation of mental health issues among migrant workers. Among them workers in low-wage jobs are particularly vulnerable, with limited access to support when they encounter psychological problems.<sup>3</sup>

## Contributing Factors

**Living and working conditions:** The working conditions for Nepalese migrants in many host countries are often strenuous, involving long hours with minimal rest, poor living arrangements, and limited access to healthcare. In a study focusing on migrant workers in Qatar, almost half of the Nepalese respondents reported facing exploitative labor practices, including forced overtime, withholding of passports, and delayed or unpaid wages.<sup>4</sup> These experiences contribute to chronic stress, potentially exacerbating underlying mental health issues.

## Social isolation and loneliness:

Migrant workers often experience profound social isolation

due to language barriers, cultural differences, and separation from family and friends. This isolation not only reduces emotional resilience but also limits social support, which is crucial in coping with mental health difficulties. Studies on Nepalese workers in Malaysia found that separation from family was associated with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms.<sup>4,5</sup>

## Family and financial pressures:

Migrant workers are the single provider for the family members back home and frequently carry the economic burden. The pressure to remit substantial portions of their earnings, compounded by the need to repay loans taken to finance their migration, adds to the mental strain. The dual pressure of work-related stress and family expectations can create a vicious cycle, further exacerbating mental health challenges.<sup>5</sup>

## Limited access to mental health services:

Poor accessibility and unavailability of mental health support due to language barriers, lack of affordable services, and stigma surrounding mental health are also the major hindrances to quality mental health. Additionally, labor laws in some host countries do not provide adequate protections or support services for mental health, making it challenging for workers to seek help.<sup>3</sup>

## Impact on families and communities:

The mental health challenges faced by Nepalese migrant workers extend beyond individuals, affecting families and communities. Children and spouses left behind may experience emotional distress, social stigma, and financial insecurity when their primary earner faces health problems. Children faced academic difficulties, emotional issues and behavioural symptoms when looked after by single parents at home. Moreover, untreated mental health issues among migrant workers can affect productivity and increase the risk of accidents, which further impacts families who rely on their income.<sup>1,2</sup>

## Addressing mental health needs

Collaboration between the Nepal government, host countries, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and mental health professionals can be helpful in addressing

the mental health needs of the migrant workers in various host countries. The key recommendations are discussed as follow:

**Pre-departure and on-site counselling:** Mandatory mental health counseling and orientation should be provided pre-departure, that includes teaching workers about coping skills and awareness of mental health resources. Such programs can reduce stigma and encourage workers to seek help when needed.

#### **Advocacy and legal protections:**

Stronger advocacy is needed to protect migrant workers' rights, ensuring they have access to healthcare, reasonable working hours, and fair wages. Nepalese authorities can work with host countries to enforce policies that protect workers' mental and physical well-being.

#### **Tele-mental health services:**

Given the lack of accessible mental health resources for migrant workers, tele-mental health initiatives could bridge the gap. Tele-counseling in the Nepali language could provide ongoing support, enabling workers to access help without the barriers of language, stigma, or physical distance.

#### **Community support networks:**

Building community support networks within host countries could alleviate feelings of loneliness. Peer groups and migrant support organizations can offer safe spaces where workers can share experiences and build resilience against mental health stressors.

#### **Conclusion**

Mental health challenges among Nepalese migrant workers are very common, deeply impacting individuals, families, and communities. Addressing these issues requires collective efforts from all stakeholders, prioritizing migrant mental health through policy reform, accessible support services, and destigmatization of mental health care. Effective intervention strategies must be both preventive and responsive, supporting the psychological well-being of migrant workers as an essential part of sustainable economic growth for Nepal.

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